

# Marine Forces Africa

**A SPMAGTF is a key element for securing strategic access and partnership with African nations**

by LtCol David L. Morgan II & Majs Jamel L. Neville & David Winnacker

**T**he growing trend of committed, violent, transnational extremists is a significant factor contributing to global instability, and irregular warfare will continue to be these extremists' method of choice throughout the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> In deterring and addressing the asymmetric threats to our national security and U.S. foreign policy, *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025* calls for the expansion of a persistent forward presence and engagement, to include the global deployment of tailored, contingency-capable MAGTFs. What does this mean in the era of shrinking resources and the reorientation of forces and tactics focused on operations in Afghanistan? How do we maintain a forward presence while working within a new reality of limited resources and reductions in the number of uniformed personnel?

Part of the answer lies in strategic deployments, such as those currently being conducted by the U.S. Marine Corps Forces Africa (MarForAf) special purpose MAGTF (SPMAGTF). From October 2011 to April 2012, SPMAGTF-12.1 deployed in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM-TRANS SAHARA to execute security cooperation missions throughout Africa in support of U.S. Africa Command (AfriCom). Like similar AfriCom initiatives, this task force (composed primarily of members of the Marine Corps Reserve Component) deployed to multiple African countries to train and equip partner-nation forces (PNFs) in infantry tactics, logistics, communications, security, small unit leadership, and other areas. Unlike previous AfriCom security cooperation initiatives, the SPMAGTF represents the first deployment of sustained presence in Africa by an endur-

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ing, forward-deployed, rotational force. As noted by a former Deputy G-5 (Strategic Plans, Policy, and Assessments) for U.S. Army Africa, the lack of assigned forces is currently the critical hurdle in conducting sustained theater security cooperation missions in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in an environment of shrinking resources, MarForAf seeks to fulfill the intent of sustained presence abroad by forging long-lasting relationships and conducting theater security cooperation operations with African PNFs via the SPMAGTF.



**We maintain a forward presence through strategic deployment.** (Photo by Sgt Tatum Vayavananda.)

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### Strategic Advantage

Prior to the MarForAf SPMAGTF's establishment, theater security cooperation missions throughout Africa were largely conducted by contingents from the special operations force (SOF) community and other units sourced via the global force management process. Many of these programs and initiatives are episodic in nature and do not necessarily align with long-term strategic objectives. These shortcomings were addressed through the establishment of the first enduring rotational force designed specifically to be regionally oriented and culturally astute, and to enable MarForAf support to AfriCom's strategic initiatives.<sup>3</sup> In his 2012 AfriCom posture statement before the House Armed Services Committee, U.S. Army GEN Carter F. Ham, Commanding General, AfriCom, stated, "The SPMAGTF is an invaluable asset for [AfriCom] and increases our ability to engage on the continent."<sup>4</sup> By providing a persistent forward presence throughout Africa, tailored for the lower end of the spectrum of military operations, the SPMAGTF engages in the "dark corners of the globe" where a U.S. presence and associated capacity-building efforts are critical. These capabilities thereby enable AfriCom and the United States to proactively address drivers of global instability and mitigate the factors that make them possible, using a modular, scalable force.

The SPMAGTF's organic crisis response capability also provides AfriCom with the ability to support civil-military operations and foreign humanitarian assistance, reinforce U.S. Embassies, and conduct noncombatant evacuation operations.<sup>5</sup> The latter was exemplified in December 2011 when SPMAGTF-12.1 prepared to deploy to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) during instability associated with general elections. As the DRC's voting process became a concern following the initial election results, the potential grew for increased violence and noncombatant evacuations. Within several hours of receipt of the warning order, SPMAGTF-12.1 conducted staff planning and developed several courses of action in support of anticipated scenarios. Though the need for U.S. military operations waned as conditions normalized in the DRC,

the SPMAGTF displayed its versatility and utility as a rapid response force-in-readiness for AfriCom.

This ability to conduct limited crisis response provides an important capability to the supported combatant commander. However, it is important to remember that the crisis response capability of the SPMAGTF is limited and is not intended to replicate the capabilities inherent in our forward-deployed MEUs. First and foremost, the SPMAGTF is a force to conduct theater security cooperation. Currently, the SPMAGTF crisis response capability is limited to providing evacuation control center support for a noncombatant evacuation, and security in support to foreign humanitarian relief operations. "Truth in advertising" of the SPMAGTF limited crisis response capabilities is important to ensure that potential crisis response missions assigned fall within the scope of the SPMAGTF training and limited equipment set. Consideration of the impact on current and planned theater security cooperation missions must also be taken into account prior to employment in support of a crisis.<sup>6</sup>

While being prepared for contingency operations, the SPMAGTF's mission primarily resides with assisting PNFs in improving their abilities to address global security challenges and prevent or respond to regional crises. This ranges from improving staff planning processes and conducting interoperability exercises with PNFs, to supporting PNFs to improve counterinsurgency, border security, counterterrorism activities, and NCO and junior officer development.<sup>7</sup> BGen Charles G. Chiarotti, Deputy Commander, MarForAf, says the SPMAGTF model yields a high return on investment:

We've got young [noncommissioned officers] out there that are engaging and training some of our partners in preparations for their own individual country's missions. . . . If you want a measure of success, it's when we see an African country that can respond to an internal crisis, a humanitarian crisis, or help a neighbor across the continent.<sup>8</sup>

While the SPMAGTF is currently primarily sourced from the Reserve Component, its mission could grow

and include more Marines from the Active Component, according to BGen Chiarotti.<sup>9</sup>

### Background

AfriCom envisioned a MarForAf SPMAGTF for the purpose of theater security cooperation and contingency response support throughout Africa.<sup>10</sup> MarForAf developed the *Scalable MAGTF Concept Paper* based on *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025*, *The Long War* operational employment concept, and *AfriCom Theater Campaign Plan* (May 2009) and submitted it to Headquarters Marine Corps Plans, Policies, and Operations (PP&O) in December 2009. In November 2010 the concept was published under the *MARFORAF SPMAGTF Concept Validation Paper*, followed by MarForAf's release of the *SPMAGTF Implementation Plan* in December 2010. In February 2011 PP&O validated the SPMAGTF concept and began coordinating with U.S. Marine Corps Forces Command (MarForCom) for funding and force sourcing. During this period, PP&O directed that Naval Air Station Sigonella, Italy, be utilized as the location for the SPMAGTF's forward basing. MarForCom and U.S. Marine Corps Forces Reserve (MarForRes) selected 4th Force Reconnaissance Company as the first designated unit, and its mobilization commenced shortly thereafter.<sup>11</sup>

### Initial Entry: SPMAGTF-12.1

SPMAGTF-12.1 was officially activated in June 2011 and commenced a comprehensive and condensed 3-month predeployment training program (PTP) aboard Camp Lejeune and at the Moyok Training Center in Currituck County, NC. 4th Force Reconnaissance Company sourced and assembled 131 Marines and sailors to form a task-organized SPMAGTF command element and 5 scalable security cooperation teams. The members sourced from the Reserve Component represented over 40 distinct Selected Marine Corps Reserve units from 4th MarDiv, 4th MAW, 4th Marine Logistics Group, Intelligence Support Battalion, and the MarForRes Headquarters, and included several members



of the Individual Ready Reserve. The SPMAGTF-12.1 PTP focused on the MOS sustainment training required for Operation ENDURING FREEDOM-TRANS SAHARA mission sets, instructor skill, and cultural awareness, and was certified for its deployment by the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group in September 2011. The PTP was further enhanced by the decision to attach SPMAGTF-12.1 to the 24th MEU, which provided an invaluable support base and model for the newly formed SPMAGTF, given its similar expeditionary mission sets and capabilities. A further benefit of this command relationship was the opportunity for a newly formed staff to learn from a mature active duty command.

Though doctrinally assigned other missions, SPMAGTF-12.1 validated the ability of 4th MarDiv's reconnaissance units to operate at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, and while integrating into the greater joint and

interagency operational environment. Force reconnaissance was also ideal for establishing an initial foothold for the new MarForAf SPMAGTF initiative, given its inherent security cooperation training capabilities and strong ties with the SOF community. SPMAGTF-12.1's capabilities were rounded out in late November 2011 with the addition of a detachment from Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 452 (VMGR-452), consisting of 2 KC-130Ts and 45 Marines who served as the SPMAGTF-12.1 aviation combat element. Detachment VMGR-452 was led by LtCol Kevin J. Kronoveter. While in support of SPMAGTF-12.1, the VMGR-452 detachment flew 341 hours and 86 sorties, and transported 571 Marines and sailors and 251,530 pounds of cargo.<sup>12</sup>

Operating under Joint Special Operations Task Force Trans Sahara and Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), SPMAGTF-12.1

partnered with multiple African countries fighting and countering terrorism and violent extremism, as well as those conducting stability and support operations, including the African Union Mission in Somalia. Some of these nations are currently threatened by a North African franchise of al-Qaeda operating under the title al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, as well as al-Shabaab and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Central and East Africa.<sup>13</sup> Prior to its relief in place/transfer of authority with SPMAGTF-12.2 on 1 April, SPMAGTF-12.1 trained and advised 1,027 African PNF officers and soldiers in 8 countries throughout East and West Africa over the course of 15 separate missions. Training and advising ranged from small unit leadership, marksmanship, vehicle maintenance, indirect fire skills, combat engineering, non-lethal weapons, intelligence planning, and unit training management to the military decisionmaking process.

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### Furthering Strategic Access and Partnership

While it is important to note the skills and level of mastery obtained by PNFs during security cooperation engagements, it is more important to understand that success is ultimately based on the trust, relationships, rapport, and mutual understanding established with PNF members in the process. As learned over the past 10 years of war, this takes time and patience, and it's not as effective when done episodically. The advantages of a persistent presence are further magnified in the AfriCom area of responsibility by the presence of theater security cooperation teams, both civilian and military, from global competitors. For this reason, the forward deployment of liaison officers plays an integral role. Their posting and integration into U.S. Embassy country teams and joint staffs, such as CJTF-HOA, enhances MarForAf's ability to identify new and potential SPMAGTF employment and training opportunities, manage current operations in their assigned countries, and maintain a persistent Marine Corps presence. They also provide continuity as teams are rotated through assignments. As in the case of SPMAGTF-12.1, the liaison officers' presence proved that this is not only essential for the detailed supply chain and logistics coordination supporting future operations and initiatives with PNFs, but also for directly influencing, developing, and providing continuity for strategic relationships with PNFs.

### The Way Ahead

The MarForAf SPMAGTF is best suited to enable AfriCom initiatives by developing habitual relationships and improving our Nation's credibility throughout Africa. Forward presence, integration with the Department of State, and persistent operations are providing the critical continuity required for maximizing capacity-building efforts with African nations and securing our national interests throughout the AO. This can only be continued through the deployment of mature, culturally astute operators and the development of comprehensive long-standing programs with PNFs. If a deliberate approach is

not taken in these areas, we run the risk of falling back to the ineffective, ad hoc, episodic acts of security cooperation of the past. These ad hoc efforts not only fail to significantly advance the PNF capabilities, but they also run the risk of offending PNF leadership by making the assumption that their forces require the most basic training.

The sustainment of security cooperation should also include the standardization of the security cooperation engagement assessments and metrics. The subjective nature of security cooperation makes these metrics difficult to develop and measure. Most initiatives primarily focus on the outputs, including the number and types of engagements conducted and PNFs trained.<sup>14</sup> However, programs must be routinely assessed to evaluate how well they align with AfriCom's strategic objectives. Doing so can aid in assessing our return on investment as outlined in 2006's *Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap: Building Partnership Capacity*, and help AfriCom maximize its effects throughout Africa.<sup>15</sup> These efforts also enable a more seamless knowledge transfer between SPMAGTFs and other organizations, nongovernmental organizations, contractors, and the United States Government, involved with theater security cooperation. These measures of effectiveness provide the data required to best tailor, manage, and continuously improve PNF training programs. This data should be centrally managed, accessible, and routinely shared between joint and interagency stakeholders, including the Department of State, AfriCom, CJTF-HOA, and SOF in order to promote a unity of effort and shared awareness of U.S. security cooperation endeavors throughout Africa and the continued fight against terrorism.

### Notes

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